

A Shepherd For The Scattered  
Reading from the New Testament: Mark 6:30-34  
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 23:1-6

The United States is home to approximately 5.21 million sheep. Yet, unlike squirrels, you won't find many of Mary's little lambs grazing around Ballantyne and Blakeney. In fact, the sheep farms in North Carolina tend to be small family operations that evolved from lifestyle choices, eco-tourism, and a commitment to sustainable, local, organic farming. The closest area operation with a website traces its origin to a family's desire to leave the stress of city life behind and turn a hobby into a way of life. You have to travel west of the Mississippi to find the larger sheep operations. Texas and California are home to 25% of the nation's sheep, but sheep ranching itself has fallen off precipitously as a result of the growth of synthetic fibers and the smaller number of people ordering lamb chops at Ruth's Chris.

So, unless you grew up in the church, with its felt-board cutouts and Christmas pageants, eventually assimilating the Bible's frequent ovine imagery, the metaphors of grazing sheep, sacrificial lambs, and shepherd kings may well seem alien to you.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.” I spent a good deal of time this week thinking about how to translate this image to a people whose exposure to shepherds is limited to preschoolers in bathrobes and fake beards restlessly roaming around a baby doll in a manger. The closest image I could come up with would be me and all my insecurities being unexpectedly thrust into a kindergarten class as a substitute teacher. Chaos would quickly ensue. *Woe to you, the idiot substitute, who destroy and scatter the kindergarteners of my school, saith the principal!*

I love little children. I enjoy holding them; talking with them; making silly faces with them; baptizing them. But the moment I’m outnumbered, I’m spooked. They intimidate the heck out of me, and I’ve just got to believe, they would easily smell the fear on me. So, throw me, by myself, into a classroom full of kindergarteners, twenty heads would immediately perk up. *Sniff!* And with some kind of ESP, the same word would pop into their little cherubic heads. *Poser!*

They’d eat me for snacktime and spit out my shoelaces. By the time the principal marched down to the classroom to see what all the racket is about? Tempura paint all over the walls! Half of ‘em escaped

out the window, hot-wiring the cars in the faculty parking lot. Little surfer dude trying to ride waves in the water table. Me? Wrapped in duct tape and thrown into the supply closet.

Picture that the next time you ask your kindergartener, “How was your day?” *Woe to you, the idiot substitutes, who destroy and scatter the kindergarteners of my school, saith the principal!* Do you get the picture now? Having made a mess of a responsibility, the true and legitimate authority shows up to sort out the mess and pick up the pieces.

The shepherd imagery would have been very accessible to 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC ears, and the prophet’s message would have been most clear. Last week we reflected on the story of northern Semitic kingdom of Israel collapsing, resulting in an exile of its leaders, artisans, and nobles at the hands of the mighty Assyrians. Well, today we fast forward 130 years and we see a similar occurrence in the southern kingdom of Judah at the hands of the conquering Babylonians. In both instances, the kings of Israel and Judah had been charged with the duty of maintaining/upholding/modeling the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Yahweh’s people Israel, and in both cases a succession of kings had failed in their role as shepherds for the people. In the same

era as the prophet Jeremiah, the prophet Ezekiel calls out the shepherds more thoroughly. “Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd.”

The memory of King David joyously and triumphantly dancing before the ark of the covenant as it enters the holy city of Jerusalem, the rejoicing hearts of a united nation; these have become nothing more than a fog from the distant past. Solomon’s great temple would be destroyed, and the people called Israel would be scorned as unwelcome immigrants and exiles trying to survive, bringing a haunting meaning Dorothy’s mantra: There is no place like home ... but *home* is no more. The Psalmist laments, “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.”

Of course, the Israelites, the citizens, the people were not exactly innocent of the chaos, trauma, and loss in the land ... just like those mean kindergarteners. It wasn't just the shepherd kings who had shirked the covenant. It's not just the kings that the prophet calls out. Jeremiah says, "Although you wash yourself with soap and use an abundance of cleansing powder, the stain of your guilt is still before me," declares the Sovereign LORD." "You have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me."

In the classic jock flick, *Remember the Titans*, the iffy and combustible venture of a newly integrated 1970 high school football team reaches a potential breaking point when the two top talents, Julius and Gary, confront the racial tension and each other. Gary attacks Julius' attitude. And Julius objects, "You wanna talk about waste; you the captain, right? Captain's supposed to be the leader, right? You been doin' your job? Then why don't you tell your white buddies to block for Rev? Because they have not blocked for him worth a plug nickel and you know it! I'm supposed to wear myself out for the team? What team? No, what I'm gonna do is look out for myself and get

mine.” To which Gary protests, “See man, that’s the worst attitude I ever heard.” Julius’ response? “Attitude reflects leadership.” Mic drop.

Attitude reflects leadership. Similarly, Jeremiah confronts a vacuum of leadership and the resultant scattering of the people as they pursue selfish interests, fleeing from perceived threats or chasing false promises. “You have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me.” We see a similar atmosphere confronted by Jesus near the beginning of his public ministry. “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” The Apostle Paul refers to a comparable environment as he sends Timothy out to provide leadership, “I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”

Attitude reflects leadership. In Jeremiah’s world, the lack of leadership, the pursuit of personal agendas, has led to chaos and collapse. In the absence of a good shepherd, the Lord intervenes through the prophet: “I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor

shall any be missing, says the Lord.” And the Lord goes further, “I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Here, the Lord is calling for a paradigm shift. Rather than looking to flawed shepherds to focus our intentions and purpose, we first look to God to form our intentions and teach us how to lead by serving the greater good. Later in his prophecy, Jeremiah will flesh out this vision, this framework for life, this light for our path, this higher purpose, this essential calling: “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Obviously, we haven’t gotten there yet. Mendacity where there should be integrity; rather than glorifying God, we spend our energy vilifying one another; truth becomes relevant only when convenient; crude, rude, and always blaming the other dude is our routine. The prophet’s message is no less relevant today. Ezekiel declares, “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water,

must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? ... Thus, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.”

Centuries later, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will describe how this comes to pass. The true shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Amidst all the political drama and the plague of uncertainties that threaten to undo us, not to mention an environment where the ominous cold war term, *mutually assured destruction*, now applies more to the relationships in your voting district than it does to nuclear arms, we can certainly relate to what Jesus saw when he looked out upon the crowd. “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

He still does. There are people out there who live out in their lives what is the best and most helpful way forward for us all. In your neighborhood, at your school or workplace, and yes, even in the institutions of government, journalism, media, church, education, and commerce, there are countless individuals, disciples really, who quietly demonstrate without fanfare the concern for the common good and reflect the qualities of the Good Shepherd because that is the One they serve. They serve on church committees, non-profit agency boards, school boards, etc. They serve in schoolrooms, crisis centers, homeless shelters, community enrichment programs. They're not seeking power or prestige, and most often have no agenda other than to serve the common good.

In spite of all the Capitol intrigue, many eyes this week will turn to Pittsburgh, remembering the neighbor, your neighbor, in the gray slacks, cardigan sweater, and navy sneakers. In some ways, Fred Rogers looms larger in death than he did in life. The ideals he represented seem to increasingly represent what we know we most need but fear we cannot achieve. We want to live in Mr. Rogers neighborhood but aren't sure how to get there. Yet, Mr. Rogers laid out the map. His

principals, mentioned in a tribute this week, included: “Know you are valued. Regulate your emotions. Have a sense of yourself. Be kind. And one more. It was always there, always implied: Respect and understand the people and places around you so you can become a productive member of YOUR neighborhood.” (Ted Anthony, *Charlotte Observer*) It’s not rocket science and it really does make a difference.

Yet, there was one statement in the tribute with which I take exception. The writer observed, “In western Pennsylvania, where his actual neighbors were, the ripples he left behind reveal a strong sense of faith – not merely the religious faith that shaped his ideals but a deep, nonsectarian commitment to the impressive, imperfect, always striving patch of the world where he chose to make both his program and his home.” True, but that so-called nonsectarian commitment wasn’t separate from his faith; it was central to his faith. It was the direct result of his faith. Folks, he was a Presbyterian minister. You know what were his last words? It was a question. He asked his wife, “Am I a sheep?” The good shepherd said, “and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

Now, I'm no Mr. Rogers, but I know a lot of Presbyterians, and Fred Rogers was just living out what I see being lived out by so many Presbyterians. We follow One and serve others. We entrust ourselves to the Good Shepherd, and we feed his sheep and maybe even those mean kindergarteners, too. Amen.